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America Faces the War: Shifts in Opinion

By Hadley Cantril, Donald Rugg, and Frederick Williams

By early October, the course of the war in Europe and the Tokyo-Rome-Berlin Pact had swung American opinion sharply toward greater aid to Britain and a firmer stand against Japan in the Far East. These and other trends of American opinion in connection with the war, from mid-summer to October 15, are described in this second report of the Princeton Public Opinion Research Project, the first of which appeared in the September issue of the QUARTERLY. The Project is financed by the Rockefeller Foundation and gathers its data through the facilities of the Gallup poll.

IN THE first report of the Princeton Public Opinion Research Project, American public opinion with respect to the war was separated into three opinion clusters—isolationist, sympathetic, and interventionist—on the basis of respondents' answers to two questions, as shown in Table 1.

What has happened to the proportions of the population who fall into these three opinion groups now that the American people have sat on the sidelines for another two months watching the Battle of Britain? Chart I clearly reveals that the course of the war has not left Americans unaffected. The isolationist group has been reduced by half its early summer size, while the interventionist pattern (those who think it is more important to help England even at the risk of war than it is for this

TABLE 1

Which of these two things do you think is more important for the U.S. to try to do?	*At the present time, which of the following should the U.S. do about helping England?*	
To keep out of war ourselves	Do less or no more than we are now doing	ISOLATIONIST
	Do more than we are now doing	SYMPATHETIC
To help England win, even at the risk of getting into war	Do more than we are now doing	INTERVENTIONIST

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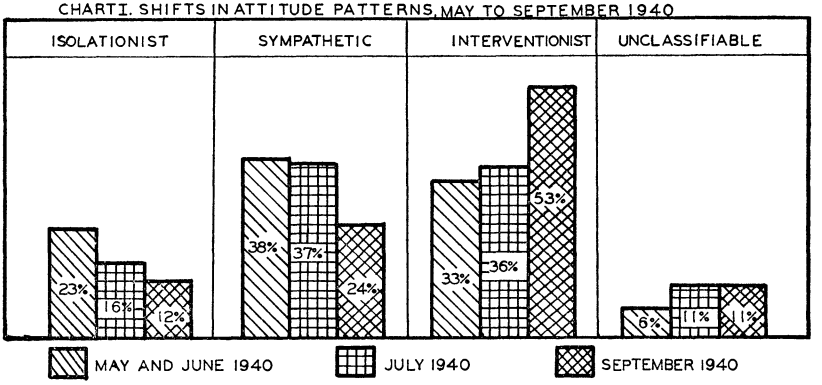
CHART I. SHIFTS IN ATTITUDE PATTERNS, MAY TO SEPTEMBER 1940



country to stay out of war, and who also feel that we are not now doing enough to help England) has swollen until it now includes over one-half the population.

Where has this shift in sentiment occurred? The most significant geographic increase in the desire to help England is found in the Rocky Mountain states. Chart II shows the present sectional variations in isolationist and interventionist sentiment.

The South and Southwest continues to be most belligerent in its attitude, the East Central and West Central states least interventionist. People from small towns have joined the interventionist camp more rapidly than city-dwellers. The bulk of the interventionists continues to be drawn from the middle and upper income people over thirty, while young people from the upper class continue to be most isolationist in their attitudes.

Frames of Reference

When the opinions of individuals who fall into these three clusters are compared on a wide variety of issues, it is clear that a person's opinions concerning the war are merely reflections of a single or a very few pervasive, deeply rooted frames of reference. Even a cursory glance at Table 2 will show how consistently the interventionists and isolationists differ on the issues listed. If a person believes the United States should not help England, he is also likely to believe, for example, that we should not run any risk of war in the Far East.

Because specific opinions are derived from more basic standards of judgment, the strategy of the Tokyo-Rome-Berlin Pact of September 27, 1940—apparently designed to frighten American public opinion from its desire to help England, by intensifying the threat of trouble with Japan—seems so far to have failed. As the following figures show, the pact and related events more than doubled the number of people ready to risk war to curb Japan, while during the same period the number of those ready to risk war to help England mounted significantly.

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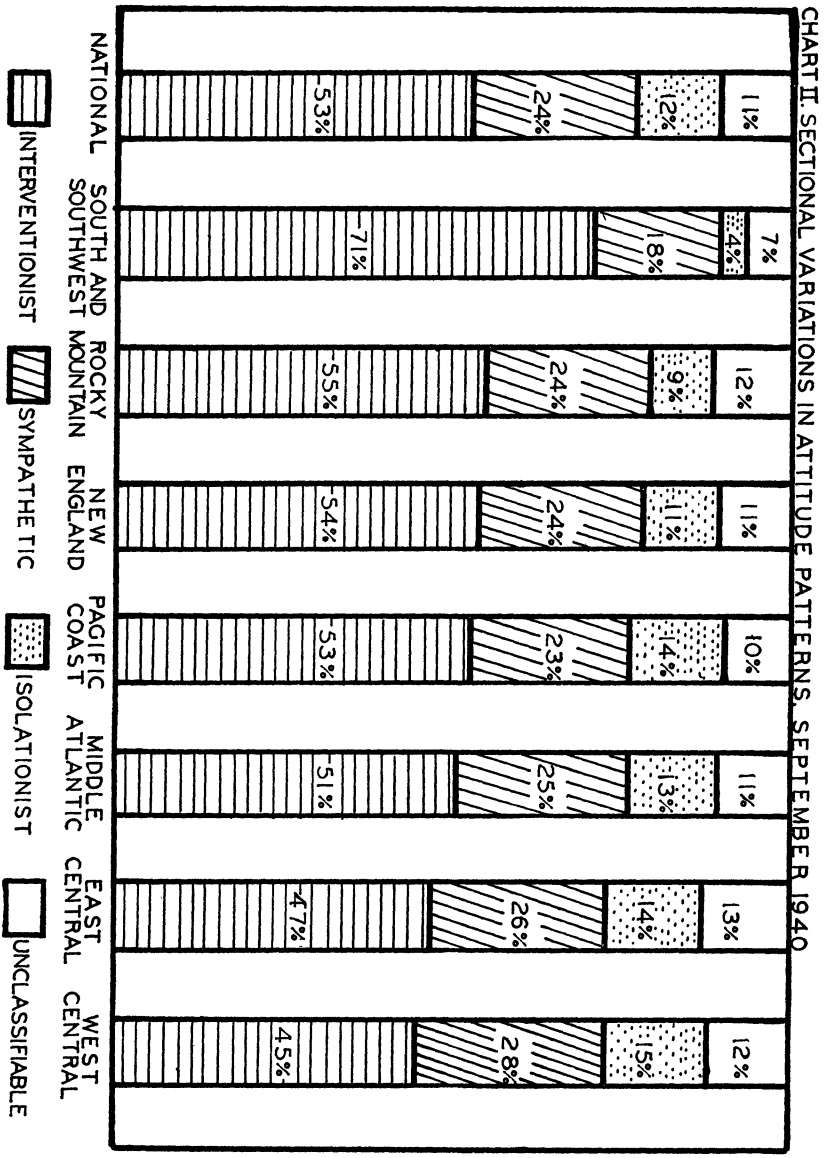

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Which of these two things do you think is the more important for the United States to try to do: (1) To keep out of war ourselves; (2) To help England win, even at the risk of getting into the war?

TABLE 2

Issues	*Isol.*	*Symp.*	*Inter.*	*Ratio*	*Rank order*
In order to help England, the law should be changed so England could borrow money from us	14%	41%	64%	4.6	1
Think the U.S. should send more planes to England even though this might delay our own defense	18	45	70	3.9	2
Think England will win the war	23	43	59	2.6	3
Think Germany would start a war against the U.S. in the next ten years	33	54	72	2.2	4
If Germany wins the war, U.S. should stop trade and diplomatic relations with Germany	12	19	25	2.1	5
Think England should continue to fight Germany and Italy, rather than making peace now	43	68	87	2.0	6
Would be personally affected by a German victory	43	63	85	2.0	6
If it appears certain that England will lose unless we send materials, we should give more help	49	91	98	2.0	6
Think it more important for England to win than for their candidate to be elected	29	49	57	2.0	6
Think U.S. should risk war if necessary to keep Japan from getting control of China	9	8	18	2.0	6
Think the U.S. will go into the war	30	34	53	1.8	7
Think Germany will try to get control of the South American countries	48	67	81	1.7	8
U.S. should buy S.A. farm products to keep Germany from getting control of S.A. trade	34	52	59	1.7	8
If clear that Germany is getting control of S.A., U.S. should send army and navy there	47	67	80	1.6	9
Favor increasing army and navy by drafting men 18-32 to serve in armed forces for one year	54	67	79	1.5	10
Willing to pay considerably more taxes to meet cost of national defense program	59	73	87	1.5	10
Would favor U.S. declaring war on Germany now, if sure Germany would attack us after England	41	45	63	1.5	10
Think government control of industry should be increased in connection with national defense	44	54	62	1.4	11
Think Roosevelt would handle our country's foreign affairs better than Willkie	45	58	62	1.4	11
If Germany does try to get control of S.A., the U.S. should do something about it	66	80	88	1.3	12

The percentages indicate the proportion of each of the three groups in favor of the issue listed. The fourth column is the ratio of the interventionist to the isolationist vote on each question. The fifth column gives the rank order of the ratios.

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	*July**	*October†*
Keep out	59%	36%
Help England	37	59
No opinion	4	5

Do you think the United States should let Japan get control of China, or do you think we should risk a war with Japan to keep the Japanese from controlling China?

	*July**	*October†*
Let Japan control	47%	30%
Risk war if necessary	12	29
Other	16	15
No opinion	25	26

Values Behind Opinions

What lies behind the two extreme opinion patterns? Particularly noticeable (Table 2) is the fact that four times as many interventionists as isolationists would be willing to have this country loan money to England, or to send more planes to England even if our own defense program were delayed. Over twice as many interventionists as isolationists feel it is more important for England to win the war than for their favorite Presidential candidate to be elected. When economic status and age are held constant, we find that more interventionists than isolationists in any economic-age group preferred Roosevelt to Willkie (Table 3).

It is clear, then, that those whom we have classed as "isolationists" do believe that what happens within our own borders is more important to them than what happens abroad.

It is significant, however, that the opinions of isolationists are not influenced by fear that family members would be involved in active war duty. It was reported earlier[1] that a

* The ballot on which this question appeared was sent out to interviewers on July 20; interviewing was conducted over the next ten days.

† The ballot on which this question appeared was sent out to interviewers on September 30; interviewing was conducted over the next ten days.

[1] Rugg, D., and Cantril, H., "War Attitudes of Families with Potential Soldiers," PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY, 1940, 4: 327-330 (June 1940).

TABLE 3

Percentage of Interventionists and Isolationists Favoring Roosevelt, with Economic Status and Age Held Constant

	Interventionist	*Isolationist*
Upper Income Group		
Under 30	42%	26%
30-49	38	25
50 and over	32	22
Middle Income Group		
Under 30	57	48
30-49	56	43
50 and over	49	34
Lower Income Group		
Under 30	69	56
30-49	72	64
50 and over	66	60

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month after the outbreak of war no differences were found between the attitudes of persons with family members of military age and persons who have no such family members. This finding still holds, even though the likelihood that the United States may enter the war is felt by the public to be greater now than it ever has been (58 per cent of the total as of September 30). Apparently, then, the lack of relationship between opinions toward the war and the possibility that a family member will become directly involved as a cog in the military machine is not due entirely to the fact that the war is still regarded as remote and impersonal. It seems more likely, as was suggested before, that "acquired social values for many persons may be more highly cherished than more personal values and attachments to loved ones." Hence, if a person identifies himself with these values, they—rather than personal attachments—will determine specific opinions.

For the isolationists, the prospect of a German victory (which they believe is likely) is not particularly disturbing. In answer to the question, "At the present time, do you find yourself worrying more than usual about your own future?" fewer isolationists than interventionists say that their worries are greater now than usual. Only half as many of them as the interventionists believe that Germany would start a war with this country if she were victorious in Europe, or that they themselves would be personally affected by a German victory. The English should give up now, say a majority of isolationists, while only half of them, as contrasted with nine-tenths of the interventionists, think we should help England more, even if it appears certain she will lose the war unless our help is forthcoming. And if Germany wins, twice as many isolationists as interventionists believe this government should continue trade and diplomatic relations with the victor.

On the other hand, isolationists as well as interventionists see their self-interest involved when issues are confined to this hemisphere. Least differences in opinions are found on questions concerning national defense and on the desirability of taking action to stop German penetration in South America. The rank order of the ratio of the differences between the opinions of isolationists and interventionists (Table 2) reveals that differences of opinion become greater as the source of potential involvement becomes further removed from the Americas.

At present people in this country are almost unanimous in their desire for a strong national defense program and in their willingness to make some sacrifice for it; at least two thirds of them extend their psychological space of self-interest as far south as Cape Horn and are willing to defend with arms any encroachment upon it; about 60 per cent are willing to risk war to preserve the values with which they identify themselves and which they see threatened across the Atlantic; while the values of only about 30 per cent extend across the Pacific with sufficient intensity to justify possible military conflict.

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